

# **PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS AND HIGH-ACHIEVING STUDENTS**

## **Carbondale Community High School ■ Garwin Family Foundation**

### **Introduction**

***Mr. Stephen Murphy, Superintendent, Carbondale Community High School***

Carbondale Community High School is a single-school high school district with an enrollment of roughly 1,000 students situated in a university community. The student body is diverse: 53% white, 28% black, 10% Hispanic, and 5% Asian. Low-income students make up 58% of the student body.

For a number of years, the Garwin Family Foundation (GFF) has made generous financial contributions to our Fine Arts program. In 2013, Dr. Ryan and her brother, Dr. Mark Garwin, approached the district with an idea to sponsor a program to provide support for gifted students to pursue *rigorous* summer opportunities. The amount of the commitment would be roughly \$25,000 annually.

Like many high schools, we have numerous supporters who donate funds toward scholarships after graduation. What was novel about the GFF's approach was that the donations would benefit underclassmen, and offered literally life-changing opportunities that could alter students' perspective about their potential college and career pathways.

The program we are discussing is unique, and requires work on the part of both the school and foundation. You may not be able to replicate it exactly in your district. But I would encourage school leaders, as you are approached with potential scholarship donors, to consider the possibilities for funding opportunities for students other than graduating seniors.

The GFF doesn't just write the checks. One key aspect of the program is the rigorous application and feedback process imbedded in the program. The structure of the program (as outlined below) provides additional challenges and growth opportunities for gifted students.

### **Unmet Need**

***Ms. Mary Kathleen Ryan, M.Ed., Associate Director, Garwin Family Foundation***

The GFF's summer programs are aimed at helping high-achieving students reach even higher heights. Teacher surveys tell us that educators are worried that recent focus on raising the standardized test scores of low-performing students has led to gifted students becoming overlooked, because they are consistently able to show proficiency. The largest gains have been made in recent years with so-called "bubble kids," those who were previously on the verge of meeting academic expectations, but had not yet done so. This is an important success, but, as of 2008, the top 10% of students were showing little to no academic gains. And, while

much is made of the statistics of how far behind the average U.S. student is when compared to the rest of the world, our high-achieving students are also not hitting the same proficiencies as other nations. To put it simply, our best and brightest are below average compared to other countries' best and brightest. The Every Student Succeeds Act attempts to rectify this by allowing more funds to be used for gifted and talented programs, but focus has still largely been on helping underperforming students.

High-achieving students have needs—academic, emotional, and social—that are unique. They require coursework that challenges them and holds their attention. They need multiple levels of social supports that encourage them to keep striving and growing. Students who are low-income but high-achieving often face even more obstacles, and they're estimated to number more than 3 million kids. They often attend schools that include overworked counseling services, underfunded or nonexistent gifted programs, and a lack of available advanced coursework that would prepare them best for high achievement at the college level. Although Carbondale Community High School does offer many advanced-level courses, some of our students have still managed to max them out already, and are looking for even more challenge than the school currently offers.

A public-private partnership that focuses on providing challenging coursework for talented kids is well suited to help these students. According to the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, [i]Isolation can be a major factor in the lives of low-income high achievers. Summer programs can both supplement learning and help build communities of social and emotional support for high school and beyond." A 2006 study found that adolescents attending a challenging summer program for gifted students reported higher levels of perceived peer relations after participation. Rigorous academic summer programs also help combat summer learning loss, a phenomenon that hits children of low socio-economic status the hardest. Summer programs can also introduce kids to a supportive network of peers and adults, including the mini-network we create within the GFF itself.

#### *Sources*

- Falling Out of the Lead (The Education Trust, 2014);
- Unintended Consequences of No Child Left Behind Mandates on Gifted Students (Beisser, 2008);
- Don't Leave Gifted Students Behind (Spielhagen, Education Week, 2012);
- Unlocking Emergent Talent (National Association for Gifted Children, 2012);
- The Closing the Excellence Gap website [excellencegap.org](http://excellencegap.org);
- Effects of a Summer Program on the Social Self-Concepts of Gifted Adolescents (Rinn, 2006);
- Achievement Trap (Jack Kent Cook Foundation, 2007)

## **Garwin Family Foundation**

***Dr. Marsha Ryan, M.D., J.D., FACS, President, Garwin Family Foundation***

The Garwin Family Foundation (GFF), a private operating foundation, was born in Oklahoma City in 1993, the brainchild of Leo and Ruth Garwin. They funded the foundation, added money from my maternal uncle's estate, and asked my brother and me, both Carbondale residents at the time, to decide how to allocate resources. The overarching principle was that all donations from the foundation should promote excellence in arts and sciences, and that single-minded mission is reflected in the tag line: *Furthering Study. Fostering Achievement.*

We began life as a donor to the Southern Illinois University Schools of Law and Medicine, underwriting M.D./J.D. students, professorships, lectures, and visitors. In the last several years, however, we shifted our focus to Carbondale Community High School (CCHS) and its most talented academic students. My brother suggested the new focus, and he and I, the current officers of the GFF, approached Mr. Murphy to propose the idea of sponsoring high-achieving CCHS students for summer study programs.

In order to make this work on our end, we hired a program director, Michele Mekel, also my brother's suggestion, and she made contact with Erinn Murphy. Thus, we had the right people in all the right places: the private foundation, the public-school administration, the dedicated foundation staff, and the liaison with the faculty and students. We then created our own process of recruiting and reviewing applicants, helping the students to match themselves with challenging programs, budgeting to see what the demands on our purse would be, and following up with the students before, during, and after their weeks away. It is labor intensive, but it is very rewarding work. Let the pictures speak for themselves.

Ours is a small foundation, but, even so, over the ensuing 4 years since we began this collaborative relationship with CCHS, we have funded 20 sponsorships to nationally ranked programs that challenge students and prepare them to step off into college and then into life. We review and pre-approve programs for academic rigor, but we are willing to add other qualified programs as students suggest them. We began with a focus on STEM students, but have taken great pains to add students in the arts. We take pride in the successes of these young people, and we delight in their growth in both academic and social arenas. We believe that the work they do to be awarded sponsorships prepares them for school and job applications. We believe that the experience away from home teaches them that they, smart as they are, are not alone in the world. We believe that their summers away from home make that dreaded first semester at college much easier. We believe that they are seen more favorably by colleges—both for having been recipients of our sponsorships, and for sometimes having been introduced to the colleges of their choice during their summer programs.

We, the officers of the GFF, are in succession-planning mode. The good news for the partnership is that all four of the associate directors, including my daughter, Kit, are CCHS

grads, and all are fully invested in the continued success of the GFF, and of CCHS and its best and brightest students. We are all acutely aware of the mission and how to do it faithfully, and Michele will tell you how helpful that is in every corner of the enterprise. It allows us to pick programs and students in a consistent manner. It forces us to make certain that the work is being done faithfully by program and student alike.

We believe, and we argue this is not hyperbole, that we are changing the world, one child and one experience at a time. This program, again without hyperbole, makes us indescribably happy. We thank our program director, Michele Mekel, and our internal co-conspirators, Steve Murphy and Erinn Murphy. We might have had a private philanthropic vision, but without the practical, dedicated help on the inside of the high school, we would have gotten nothing done. It goes without saying that we love our GFFers. They become our greatest allies in recruitment and our peer advisors for the students who come after them. Indeed, this is truly a joint labor of love.

My suggestion is that you make something like this happen wherever you live and work. Find a private donor with a passion (ours is merit, but yours could be anything else you love), broker partnerships around that passion (assuming the idea appeals to both the donor and the school), and see the difference to be made in the lives of the children we all serve.

### **Program Overview**

***Ms. Michele Mekel, J.D., MBA, MHA, Program Administrator, Garwin Family Foundation***

This unique, merit-based program was the inspiration of the Garwin Family Foundation's (GFF's) two senior principals, Dr. Marsha Ryan and Dr. Mark Garwin. The program is about "leveling up"—both at the individual student level and at the community level.

It gives the best and brightest Carbondale Community High School (CCHS) students an opportunity to bring their already outstanding abilities in the arts, sciences, or mathematics to a higher stage of mastery and to develop some independent living skills by attending highly selective, residential enrichment programs at world-class institutions, where they are surrounded by like-minded peers. The GFF program also provides the population of high school students from Carbondale, which would be considered by many standards to be an underserved, rural community, with a chance to reach beyond the locality and access top-quality, summer educational opportunities—earning a distinction that sets them apart when competing nationally for admission to such top-tier institutions of higher education.

Over the course of four years, we have seen that being selected for and attending such pre-collegiate opportunities makes a significant difference in the academic trajectories of sponsored students. Some examples of sponsored enrichment programs and concentrations have included, but are not limited to:

- Brown University's Pre-College Program (stem cell biology),
- Columbia University's High School Summer Program (molecular biology),
- Interlochen Percussion Institute,

- Missouri S&T's Summer Research Academy (robotic programming),
- New York University's Tisch School of the Arts High School Program (recorded music),
- Northwestern University's Center for Talent Development (physics),
- Rhode Island School of Design's Pre-Collegiate Program (jewelry design),
- Stanford University's Pre-College Summer Institutes High School Program (astrochemistry, engineering, physics),
- Students and Teachers as Research Scientists (St. Louis) (biomedical engineering),
- University Chicago's Summer Quarter for High School Student (quantitative modeling in biology),
- University of Denver's Lamont Summer Music Academy, and
- Yong In University (South Korea) (Olympic-level taekwondo training).

Graduating sponsorees have gone on to top-level universities, often where they attended their enrichment program and frequently in the area studied during the program. The colleges into which they have matriculated include:

- Brown University,
- Drexel University (accelerated B.A./MBA program),
- Notre Dame University,
- George Washington University,
- Rhode Island School of Design,
- University of Chicago, and
- University of Missouri-Kansas City (six-year B.S./M.D. program).

As to specific details of our highly structured program, it begins with the advent of the school year with a three-pronged approach. First, we select program deadlines for the coming year in conjunction with CCHS's academic calendar, and, based on our experience from the prior year, we review and revise our online application, as well as our listing of pre-approved enrichment opportunities. Both the application and the list of pre-approved enrichment programs can be found on the GFF's website: [www.garwinfamilyfoundation.com](http://www.garwinfamilyfoundation.com). Second, with assistance from CCHS, we provide electronic, paper, and in-person education about the program, any changes, and deadlines to the CCHS school counselors, faculty, and students via our social media, website, paper flyers, and in-person sessions. Third, we welcome back and debrief with the prior summer's sponsorship recipients via a group pizza party and formalized individual exit interviews. Throughout the fall, we field questions, and provide program information and deadline reminders, as well as serve as reference writers and essay reviewers for prior sponsorship winners, who are often in the midst of college and scholarship applications.

With the spring semester and the advent of the new year, we turn to the application process for the coming summer. The application process, which is outlined on the foundation's website, includes:

- an online application form that explores students' academic achievements, extracurricular activities, area of interest and skill, enrichment program selections, and financial need;
- a resume;

- a statement-of-intent essay;
- two letters of reference from CCHS faculty; and
- a portfolio for students in the arts, including fine arts, music, dance, and writing.

Students are also required to independently apply to the enrichment programs they selected, and to submit financial aid applications to those programs. In all, this process closely mirrors that of applications for college, scholarships, and jobs—preparing students for such future endeavors.

Upon receipt, the applications are reviewed directly following the close of the submission deadline, and the students demonstrating the greatest levels of merit based on their overall application, including selection of the most rigorous enrichment programs in line with their particular talents and areas of interest, are then invited to a formal interview with GFF representatives. Following the interviews, the foundation’s principals:

- comparatively evaluate the collected data points on each interviewee;
- engage in a budgeting exercise based on student need, program costs, and foundation resources; and
- make finalist determinations.

Once the finalists have received the results of their program applications and financial aid requests, the foundation makes final sponsorship decisions and notifies students. Letters of acceptance, outlining student responsibilities, and consent forms are executed by students and their parents. Then program payments for tuition costs are submitted directly to programs on behalf of sponsored students, and sponsored students demonstrating need are reimbursed further for any additional fees and expenses, such as travel. A press release announcing the year’s sponsorship recipients is ultimately shared on the foundation’s website and social media, provided to CCHS audiences, and disseminated to local media. In May, the foundation hosts a pizza-party send off for the sponsorship winners and also celebrates any graduating GFFers from prior years.

It should be noted that even applicants who do not matriculate to the point of being sponsorees benefit from the process. They:

- understand the import of meeting deadlines;
- learn how to prepare a resume;
- gain experience writing statement-of-intent essays; and
- practice interviewing skills.

Once summer arrives, the real fun begins. Students arrive at their programs and introduce their instructors and other enrichment-program contacts to me, the foundation’s program administrator, granting permission for programs to provide the foundation with student-performance reports—establishing an additional level of accountability for both sponsorees and programs. At least once a week, while the students are at their enrichment programs, we engage in a check-in process via email, in which the students share what they are learning, how they are adjusting, and photos or videos from their enrichment-program projects and activities.

Highlights from each student’s experience are celebrated on the foundation’s social media platforms throughout the summer. At the midterm point and at the endpoint of each student’s program, we are in contact program instructors and other program contacts to get feedback on student performance.

Upon returning home, the sponsorship recipients provide the foundation with a reflective final report that details their experiences and serves as a self-assessment exercise. The written report covers:

- the academic or technical aspects of their learning;
- the life skills gained by living away from home—often for the first time; and
- the social growth they experienced by being immersed with equally talented students from around the globe.

These reports, once reviewed and edited, are: shared with GFF and CCHS audiences, provided to enrichment-program contacts as a thank you for cooperation throughout the process, and posted on the GFF’s website and social media.

In addition to growing a strong pool of excellent student applicants each year, the keys to success include:

- a mission-driven vision that serves as a constant touchstone;
- a process that undergoes regular review and improvement;
- dedicated personnel resources for both the foundation and CCHS; and
- the building and maintenance of key relationships, including:
  - between the foundation administrator and the school-district liaison;
  - with all CCHS school counselors and upper-division teachers in math, science, English, music, and the arts;
  - with prior GFFers, who serve as the best peer liaisons and “recruiters”;
  - with the enrichment programs; and
  - with foundation audiences, including donors and members of the public.

None of this, of course, would be even remotely possible without tremendous support from and collaboration with CCHS.

### **Carbondale Community High School**

***Ms. Erinn Murphy, M.S., Counseling Dept. Chair, College & Career Counselor, Carbondale Community High School***

As the school liaison, I meet with Ms. Mekel ahead of each year’s process to determine deadline dates, learn about program updates, and discuss how best to advertise the program.

In October, my office hosts two separate “Brown Bag” lunches, where invited students eat and learn about the program from previously sponsored students and myself. The previous GFF-ers are an amazing resource at these meetings, and they relay information from the “been there, done that” perspective that interested and eligible students appreciate. The application

process is intimidating to our students, as most have not gone through a process like this before, and the responsibility to complete it accurately and on time is on them! Hearing from previously sponsored students that it is doable, and that it is a constructive use of time/energy is comforting and makes the process seem less intimidating.

Student invitations go to our highest achieving 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> graders. The invite list is created through reviewing each class's GPA listing, AP and honors rosters, and assessment information. I also consult with each of the class counselors, as we have one counselor for each class, to make sure that eligible students are not overlooked. I also seek recommendations from our Fine Arts faculty, as students gifted in the arts may not present the same transcript, schedule, or test scores as the other invitees, but they are valued, important, and welcomed additions to the applicant pool.

Part of my role is to keep the program on the radar of faculty and counselors. An understanding of the desired candidate, an understanding of the GFF mission, and an understanding of our duty to try and connect appropriate students to this opportunity are all pieces of information that I share on an ongoing basis and whenever consulted with about the program. It is also my duty as liaison to connect Dr. Ryan and Ms. Mekel with specific academic departments for informational meetings and program explanation as requested. We have done this throughout the start of the program, and I anticipate "reminder" meetings will occur in future years as faculty turns over and/or the foundation feels contact with our faculty is needed. I am here to assist the foundation however requested.

Additional duties that are part of my role in the process include communicating with interested students on an ongoing basis. I encourage students to come to me first so that I can try to answer their questions and/or so that I can seek the answer from Ms. Mekel and then relay it to them. I try to keep the day-to-day questions and procedural inquiries in my office instead of in Ms. Mekel's. This go-between role has served me well in learning the ins and outs of the program and gathering historical data related to program preferences.

General ways that I am involved in the application and selection process include: advertising the program via announcements and fliers, collecting transcripts, portfolios (if applicable) and letters of recommendation for all applications, handing off these parts of the application to Ms. Mekel on the submission date, filling in the blanks related to student achievement and skill set as requested, scheduling interviews on the agreed-upon date that is set before the school year begins, notifying students of interview times and recommended attire, scheduling a photo of each year's sponsored students, and completing the circle of information with faculty and staff within the building by sending out a photo and confirmation of selected students. Teachers appreciate this and often share excitement for "their" students! As the process begins each year, I also send faculty an update linking them to the student summary essays.

It is worth noting the importance of the letter of recommendation for this process. As the years have gone by, foundation personnel and I have communicated in more detail and with more emphasis specifically on what they are looking for in that teacher letter: "Please write about the



student as a presence (or non-presence in your classroom).” Teacher letters are meant to relay what Student X, Y, and Z bring the classroom and how they perform in the classroom. Support your teachers in this process however necessary; share a letter of reference do’s and don’ts list, effective sample letters, host a letter of rec workshop ... make this piece meaningful to the process.

***This process has been a big win for CCHS, in large part, because all parties really click and work well together. The liaison role does not have to be a counselor, but it does have to be a person that cares about the process, cares about the program, and, mostly, knows and cares about the students. Who knows your students, who can connect all of the dots illustrated here, and who can support the mission of your donor to help make the program work with your school?***

## **Contacts**

### **Carbondale Community High School**

- Website: <http://www.cchs165.jacksn.k12.il.us>
- Mr. Stephen Murphy, M.S., Superintendent: [steve.murphy@cchs.165.com](mailto:steve.murphy@cchs.165.com)
- Ms. Erinn Murphy, M.S., Counseling Dept. Chair, College & Career Counselor: [erinn.murphy@cchs.165.com](mailto:erinn.murphy@cchs.165.com)

### **Garwin Family Foundation**

- Website: <http://www.garwinfamilyfoundation.org>
- Dr. Marsha Ryan, M.D., J.D., FACS, President: [marshagryan@gmail.com](mailto:marshagryan@gmail.com)
- Ms. Mary Kathleen Ryan, M.Ed., Associate Director: [marykathleenryan@gmail.com](mailto:marykathleenryan@gmail.com)
- Ms. Michele Mekel, J.D., MBA, MHA, Program Administrator: [info@garwinfamilyfoundation.org](mailto:info@garwinfamilyfoundation.org)